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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUATEMALA 002634

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: JUST ANOTHER LATIN AMERICAN ELECTION, FOR NOW

Classified By: PolCouns David Lindwall for reason 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The election campaign, which got off to a violent start, marred by allegations of expected fraud, has settled in recent weeks into what the UN mission aptly described as "just another Latin American election." The continuing heated confrontation between the ruling FRG and the opposition, however, lead many to believe that further violence is possible. Polls continue to show Berger with a comfortable lead, but the gap between the three front runners, including General Rios Montt, is narrowing. UNE candidate Colom told us that if the FRG makes it into the second round of the elections, all the opposition parties have agreed to oppose the FRG. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal decided unanimously to allow FRG candidate for mayor of Guatemala City Rabbe to run, overturning an earlier decision by the Registry of Persons that he had not met the conditions to be a candidate. The OAS Election Observation Mission filed complaints against President Portillo and Guatemala City Mayor (and candidate for President) Garcia Gallont for using public resources to promote partisan campaigns. The EU election observation mission is on the ground, and will have a large scale presence around the country on election day. End summary.

The Calm Before the Storm?

12. (C) Since the beginning of August, the national election campaign in Guatemala has been characterized by fiery stump speeches by all candidates in the most remote corners of the country and uninspiring public debates (with only the smaller parties participating) in the capital. The violent confrontation that characterized the early part of the campaign and the daily allegations that the FRG was going to commit massive fraud throughout the campaign and on election day have virtually disappeared, at least for now. An internal MINUGUA document (please protect) of early October, notes that of the twenty cases of murders of "political activists," only two were clearly politically motivated, and most of the others were clearly not politically motivated. It further concludes that the election campaign has become "just another Latin American election." With levels of confrontation still high, and with the UNE and FRG hotly contesting second place (in order to make it into the second round of elections), we can not rule out the possibility of future violence. But for now, we agree that the election campaign has settled into a more normal rhythm.

Polls Show Gap Narrowing

13. (U) An unpublished Noguera poll, taken between September 26 and October 5, shows that GANA candidate Berger's lead over UNE's Colom and the FRG's Rios Montt has narrowed somewhat, though it still gives Berger a 20 point lead. While we caution that polls in Guatemala are widely viewed as subject to partisan manipulation, the Noguera poll has been the most consistent with anecdotal evidence and our own soundings of voter preferences outside the capital. Following are Noguera's conclusions:

	voter preference as a percentage of total respondents			
	July	August	September	October
Berger - GANA	30.5	39.6	40.7	36.2
Colom - UNE	12.6	12.5	16.7	15.9
Rios Montt - FRG	10.3	11.5	12.2	15.5
Lopez R. - PAN	3.4	4.2	4.9	6.3
Undecided	23.5	17.7	13.7	13.0

14. (U) The poll notes that respondents view Berger as best positioned to create more jobs, but give him only a slight lead over Rios Montt in reducing crime. The poll also concludes that 57.7% of respondents said they would never vote for Rios Montt, compared to 5.9% who said they would never vote for Berger.

15. (C) UNE candidate Alvaro Colom told the Ambassador on October 8 that the ten smaller parties (all but the FRG and GANA) have agreed to join forces and support whichever of the ten parties makes it into the second round of elections. He said that if none of them make it, and the runoff is between GANA and the FRG, they will all support GANA. He acknowledged that none of the ten party leaders could command the second round vote of their followers, but said it was inconceivable that the FRG would pick up support from opposition voters.

Green Light to Rabbe's Mayoral Candidacy

16. (U) On October 8 the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) ruled unanimously that FRG candidate for Mayor of Guatemala City, Luis Rabbe, was eligible to run, overturning an earlier decision by the Registry of Persons which found him ineligible. The TSE members concluded that the FRG did not in fact have a functioning Municipal Assembly, and therefore, the FRG's National Assembly had correctly chosen the mayoral candidate. While some in the opposition groused at the decision, the TSE is widely viewed as impartial, and their unanimous decision put an end to the controversy. The Noguera poll gives Rabbe 10.2% of voter preferences, compared with 47.0% for Unionista candidate (and former President) Alvaro Arzu and 20.2% for GANA's candidate Jorge Briz.

OAS Questions Partisan Actions of Portillo and Garcia Gallont

17. (U) The OAS EOM filed complaints with the Public Ministry on October 9 alleging that President Portillo and Mayor of Guatemala City Fritz Garcia improperly used their public positions to promote partisan candidacies. The complaint alleges that Portillo participated in FRG campaign rallies after the May convocation of national elections, violating the electoral law which forbids public officials from participating in partisan events. Mayor Garcia Gallont, who is running as the presidential candidate for the Unionista Party, was accused of printing campaign propaganda on all municipal receipts. The complaints have been filed with the Public Ministry for investigation and possible prosecution. Neither Portillo nor Garcia Gallont have responded to the charges publicly so far.

EU Observation Mission on the Ground

18. (SBU) The Ambassador met with the head of the EU electoral observation mission, Jannis Sakellariou, and his deputy, Rafael Lopez Pintor, on October 8. They noted that the EU mission will soon be opening offices in different regions of Guatemala, and will have a large presence on election day. The EU mission is coordinating with the OAS EOM to avoid duplication of efforts, but told us that efforts to coordinate with the OAS in other recent elections had had "mixed success." The OAS EOM similarly told us that there is good communication between the missions, but that the mandate of the missions was different enough that coordination was only effective on very specific issues.

Lots of Illiterate Voters

19. (U) The TSE completed its update of the electoral register ("padron"), and announced that a total of 5,073,310 Guatemalans had registered to vote. The total represents an increase over the registry from 1999 roughly equal to population growth. Some illustrative figures from the registry: 29% of registered voters (1,477,814) identified themselves as illiterate; 26% of registered voters live in Guatemala City and its suburbs; the indigenous provinces of Quiche, Huehuetenango and San Marcos (that historically vote heavily for the FRG) make up 18% of registered voters.

Comment

10. (C) Expressions of concern that FRG fraud or manipulation could still influence the election continue to surface, but in recent weeks the election campaign has taken on the appearance of "just another Latin American election." This week's "fear du jour" is that the FRG has already contracted all public transportation for election day, depriving the other parties of means to transport their voters to the polls. While it is possible that the FRG has begun contracting busses, some of our opposition contacts have expressed doubt that the FRG could corner the market nationally. We are not prepared to speculate that the final four weeks of this heated campaign will be as "normal" as the past ten weeks, especially if the FRG and UNE view themselves as neck and neck for a space in the second round. However, the growing presence of international observers, especially in the countryside, and the public stand by the OAS against electoral violence and abuses to the electoral law, create disincentives for a last minute increase in bad behavior by the FRG or other political actors. The Embassy will be sending out teams of reporting officers to the countryside in coming weeks to provide snapshots of voter preferences and election issues dominating the minds of rural voters.

HAMILTON